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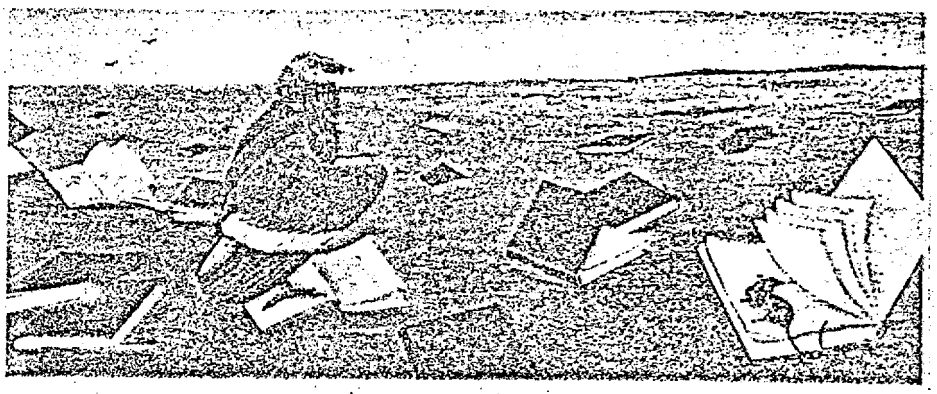
HUNT, HOWARD
SOCY.01.2 UNDERCOVER: Memoirs of An American Secret Agent (orig under Fremont-S.)

HOOKED AGAIN: THE CASE OF HOWARD HUNT

"... Most publishers do not believe Nixon will tell the truth in his memoirs, nor that the public will accept half-truths ..."



Regardless of anybody's thoughts, feelings, wishes, exhaustion, or vows to the contrary; regardless of purgative elections and the necessity of focusing on more pressing matters; regardless of the passage of time and even of whatever new and stunning medical bulletins may be issued from the West—we will never be done with Watergate. Not in books, anyway.

The fall of Richard Nixon—everything that went and is still going with it—is simply the most dramatic large-scale, real-life political story of our experience. It rivals the most dramatic in all history. In this century, perhaps only the rise and fall of Hitler equals it in terms of *elemental public drama*—the stuff that compels and sustains endless fascination, and that renders such considerations as whether that fascination is "bad" or "morbid" or "too painful" or in other ways morally or socially reprehensible (an understandably constant refrain in the case of Hitler) beside the point.

Don't get me wrong. I am suggesting a parallel only in terms of drama (or maybe melodrama). Also, there are, without any doubt, other political sagas that contain similarly compelling elements. Yet these two stand in stark relief—in part because we know so much about them.

As drama, Watergate has everything. It has classically tragic scale, endless pathos and irony, reels (literally) of vulgarity and banana-peel humor. It has an extraordinary cast of characters—memorable, improbable, representative of every type. How Shakespeare would have itched for them! It has perfect pacing, symbolic richness, the suspense of a hundred capers and of evil nearly triumphant, a vast deception that nearly worked. It addresses great questions of history, ethics, and human responsibility—power and corruption and accountability, means and ends, the ambiguous connections between "possible," "necessary," and "right." And it has a unifying, timeless, mythic theme: high ambition painfully achieved and then brought low by prefigured flaws in character and failures of perception, by common and banal betrayals, and by the mysterious momentums of opposing [illegible]

life, including those of a great many ordinary people going about their ordinary work (a night guard at the Watergate, a congressman from Newark), none anticipating the pivotal roles history would cast them in. All this and more—no matter how bone-weary we are of the subject, it's not what closes on Saturday night.

Over 100 books have been published about Nixon and Watergate (some put the figure closer to 500)—documentaries, studies of impeachment, psychobiographies, confessions, reportorial accounts, political analyses, fictions, polemics, collections of humor. Very few of these will last. The most popular, due shortly in paperback reprint, has been Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *All the President's Men*, in part because it was a "first" (and by the two most famous diggers), in greater part because it told its tale in highly dramatic terms, as suspense. (Some of it was possibly fictional: I was a believer in "Deep Throat" at first—was he Dean, Gray, Mark Felt?—but with the passage of time his existence as an individual seems less and less plausible. How *could* he have secretly marked up Woodward's *Times*, unless he loitered around the apartment house in the early morning or lived across the hall?)

Theodore H. White's forthcoming account (next spring, it is hoped, from Atheneum) will probably be the next great hit, since it promises, along with known-quantity authorship, needed perspective, as well as some spice: his *The Making of the President 1972* was highly admiring of Nixon's wisdom,

will be interesting to see just how the crow is eaten.

Meantime, the first-person insider accounts are of greatest interest. Of these, so far, Jeb Magruder's *An American Life: One Man's Road to Watergate*, remains by far the most apparently candid and insightful; maudlin, undoubtedly in some respects self-serving, but somehow giving off a persuasive metallic bong of truth. That bong is probably going to remain quite rare: books by the minors (Segretti), the majors (Haldeman), the bizarre (Martha Mitchell, Colson), and so on, may or may not materialize; it's more than likely that most of them will not give off this sound, which is one reason, probably the most important, why premanuscript publishing contracts have been so hard to come by. Far more than the public asking price, and more than his current medical incapacity, this has been the stumbling block for Nixon's own projected memoirs: most of the major prospective hardcover publishers do not believe he will tell the truth, nor that the public will accept half-truths.

That's how low his credibility has sunk. Even lying presidential memoirs have some value—but publishers have not forgotten the financial disaster, for Holt, Rinehart and Winston, of L.B.J.'s *The Vantage Point*, which was also not believed. Nor will they forget another publisher's current anguish in connection with E. Howard Hunt's just-published **Undercover: Memoirs of an American Secret Agent** (Berkley/Putnam, $8.95), which has been in the news because Hunt, as a witness at the Water-